



Department of Justice

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DEFENDANTS ARRESTED ON CHARGES OF DEFRAUDING FEMA AFTER HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA

Acting United States Attorney James R. Klindt; Donald J. Balberchak, Special Agents in Charge, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of the Inspector General, Miami Field Office; Cary Rosoff, Special Agent in Charge, United States Secret Service, Jacksonville Field Office; and Jack Cowen, Supervisory Postal Inspector, United States Postal Inspection Service, Jacksonville Office, announced today the return of indictments charging 11 Jacksonville residents for defrauding the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Department of Homeland Security, to obtain disaster assistance following Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita in 2005. Indicted by a federal grand jury were defendants: Evelyn Olivia Gist, age 29; Michele Anette Richardson, age 34; Renata Lavern Cason age 26; , Deborah Edith Straughter, age 29; Sharell Lanise Richardson, age 31; Theresa Tarver, age 31; Rosemary Mackey, age 27; Jessica Gist, age 27; Octavia Waynns, age 24; Bonnie Perry, age 50; and Daisey Lightsey, age 24. The defendants were separately charged in Indictments with conspiracy, theft of government property, and with making false, fictitious, and fraudulent claims to FEMA after having falsely claimed they were residents of the New Orleans or Galveston, Texas areas who had been displaced as a result of the disasters. If convicted, each defendant faces total maximum statutory penalties of 20 years' imprisonment.

Five individuals were arrested earlier today. Evelyn Olivia Gist, Michele Annette Richardson, and Rosemary Mackey will make their initial appearances before United States Magistrate Judge Howard T. Snyder at 3:00 p.m. today. Jessica Gist and Bonnie Perry will make their initial appearances before United States Magistrate Judge Thomas E. Morris at 3:45 p.m. today. Arrest warrants are out for the remaining individuals.

FEMA was responsible for, among other things, providing assistance to individuals in the locations that were declared major disaster areas. FEMA was authorized to provide disaster assistance to individuals and eligible victims of Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall on August 29, 2005, in the Gulf Coast region of the United States, and to victims of Hurricane Rita, which made landfall on September 24, 2005. FEMA's Individuals and Households Program provided, among other things, financial assistance to individuals who suffered property losses and damage resulting from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

These cases were investigated by the United States Secret Service, the United States Postal Inspection Service, and the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General. The cases are being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney and Senior Litigation Counsel Kathleen O'Malley.

These cases are part of the effort by the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force to prosecute disaster-related crimes from 2005 hurricanes. The Task Force was created in September 2005 by Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales to deter, investigate, and prosecute federal crimes arising from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, chaired by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division, includes members of the Secret Service, the Postal Inspector's Office, and the Executive Office for United States Attorneys, among others.

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed a violation of the federal criminal laws, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless, and until, proven guilty.